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SO WHAT ELSE IS NEW? A CHOLULA-CENTRIC PERSPECTIVE ON LOWLAND/HIGHLAND INTERACTION during the CLASSIC/POSTCLASSIC TRANSITION

Geoffrey G. McCafferty
University of Calgary

Fifty years ago, when the Tula/Chichén Itzá debate was formalized at the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología Mesa Redonda, the relationship between the two great centers was an enigma. Now, after five decades of intensive research at the two cities and numerous sites in between . . . the relationship remains an enigma. Two urban centers separated by over a thousand kilometers are practically mirror images of one another, while there is minimal evidence of intermediary sites participating in the artistic and architectural programs that unite Chichén and Tula. What gives? New archaeological discoveries, major advances in Maya hieroglyphic decipherment, and refined chronologies have, if anything, made the relationship even stronger; yet the impetus, direction, and significance of the similarity remain one of the great mysteries of Mesoamerica.

This paper will not solve the mystery. What I will try to accomplish is to set the stage for "Mayanized Mexicans" in the central highlands (McVicker 1985), with emphasis on Cacaxtla-Xochitecatl, Xochicalco, and Cholula. Intriguing snippets of Maya-like iconography on public monuments seem to "proclaim," in the sense defined by Debra Nagao (1989), at least a desired affiliation with the Classic Maya. The recognition of these Maya elements is a relatively new development, and expands the discourse on lowland/highland interaction in potentially important new directions. I will argue that Cholula was a major agent in this transformation, particularly through its multiethnic composition and the centrality of its Quetzalcoatl cult. And I will suggest that greater credence be given to ethnohistoric accounts of Gulf Coast groups such as the Nonoalca and Olmeca-Xicallanca, and their potential contributions to the Classic/Postclassic transition in central Mexico.

One historiographic element of Mesoamerican archaeology over the past fifty years has been a tendency, especially from the 1960s through the 1980s, toward a more isolationist view of the Mexican highlands and the Maya lowlands. Embedded in the "New Archaeology," which strongly eschewed diffusionism as an explanatory device (Trigger 1989: 296-297), it

was preferable to interpret local developmental processes over long-distance, *deus ex machina*-like cultural interactions. The sweeping migrations exemplified in earlier cultural histories such as those of Wigberto Jiménez Moreno (1966) were rejected as lacking the ability to explain cultural processes. With the dramatic discovery of the very Maya-like murals of Cacaxtla in 1975, this isolationist house of cards was given a good shake. Arthur Miller's (1983) edited volume on highland/lowland interaction, including many art-historical analyses, can be identified as leading the way back toward a more holistic Mesoamericanist orientation. I intend to build on that foundation to argue that recent research has demonstrated a long history of lowland/highland interactions that culminated with a very international flavor during the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic periods, in what George Kubler (1980) termed the "eclectic" style so well demonstrated at Cacaxtla.

CLASSIC CENTRAL MEXICO

The urban center of Teotihuacan dominated Classic-period central Mexico, or at least its archaeological interpretations. Teotihuacan was one of the largest cities in the world during its heyday (ca. 300–600 CE), and represents a radical development in terms of size and urban organization. It established itself as a religious center based on its monumental architecture, probably drawing upon and reifying mythic traditions of origin and cosmic centrality (Aveni 2000). The orientation of the urban grid, probably based on astronomical concepts, was mimicked by distant centers as a claim of affiliation. Similarly, the talud-tablero architectural style of Teotihuacan was copied at contemporary centers that may have been part of a loosely defined "empire." Examples in the Maya area include Early Classic Kaminaljuyu, Tikal, and Copán (Fash and Fash 2000).

Teotihuacan goods were widely distributed via long-distance exchange networks that certainly included its famous green obsidian. Evidence of Teotihuacan objects, stylistic elements, and possibly even regents to the Maya region provide clear indication of highland/lowland interaction (Braswell 2003; Fash and Fash 2000; Stuart 2000). The Merchant Barrio, as well as recently recognized Mayoid iconographic motifs and glyphic elements at Tetitla (Taube 2003) and offerings within the Pyramid of the Moon, indicate that the exchange was not one-sided. Likely trade goods from the Maya region include jadeite, colorful feathers, and jaguar skins. These exotic items were used as socio-political status markers by Teotihuacano royalty, and were probably distributed to affiliated elites as emblems of legitimacy.

Exciting recent decipherments in the Maya world have provided insights into Teotihuacan's involvement in local politics. Early in the Maya Classic, Tikal's royal chain of succession was disrupted by the premature death of its king on January 14, CE 378, followed on the same day by the "arrival" of Siyah K'ak "from the west." According to David Stuart (2000), this is probably much more than coincidence, as Siyah K'ak seems to be a

representative of "Spearthrower Owl," possibly the ruler of Teotihuacan. Shortly thereafter this relationship was formalized when Nuun Yax Ayin (aka Curl Nose) was coronated as tenth king in the Tikal dynasty. Nuun Yax Ayin was represented on Stela 31 dressed in warrior costume typical of Teotihuacan, and both his and his son's (Siyah Chan K'awil) tombs included rich offerings of Teotihuacan-style material culture. Accompanying hieroglyphic references to Spearthrower Owl and his heirs mention a place called "puh," translated as "tule place," strongly suggesting that Teotihuacan was already being identified as Tollan, the primordial place of mythic origins (Stuart 2000).

A similar process is now recognized at Copán, where the founder of the dynasty, Yax K'uk Mo', acceded to the throne in CE 428. He also bears a title of "Western Kalomte," implying that he, too, came from Teotihuacan (Fash and Fash 2000). Again, representations depict Yax K'uk Mo' in Teotihuacan costume, and he is buried deep inside Temple 16 with exotic Teotihuacan-style grave goods.

This and other information is piling up to indicate Teotihuacan political intervention in lowland Maya politics during the Early Classic (see contributions in Braswell [ed.] 2003). Explanations for this presence are still developing, however. Was this accompanied by militarism? Was it designed to ensure exchange or tribute relations? Archaeological evidence from more varied contexts is needed to augment and expand the suggestions of these epigraphic references and elite burials in order to determine the scope of foreign interaction.

What is becoming increasingly clear is that the Maya were interested in highland goods and concepts of legitimation. Gulf Coast materials were found concentrated at Teotihuacan in the "Merchant Barrio," where circular structures and exotic goods were interpreted as indicating ethnic Huastecs involved in long-distance trade (Rattray 1990, 1998). Recent "readings" of Teotihuacan mural art have revealed Maya iconography and even hieroglyphic texts, indicating the presence of literate Maya at the site (Taube 2003). Clearly, the traditional view of Mexican and Maya "isolationism" no longer works.

Teotihuacan was also actively involved with other parts of central Mexico, especially Oaxaca and the Gulf Coast. Stelae at Monte Albán depict emissaries from Teotihuacan, identified by their distinctive "tassel" headdress, who may have participated in the dedication of the South Platform (Marcus 1983). Recent discoveries by the Proyecto Especial Monte Albán 1992-1994 (Winter 1998) indicate a Teotihuacan presence at the North Platform, the most exclusive real estate at the urban center, where mica was processed as an exotic for trade or tribute to Teotihuacan. The presence of numerous Teotihuacan-style projectile points from recent excavations of the North Platform has led Marcus Winter to suggest a Teotihuacan military involvement in mid- to late Classic Monte Albán (Winter 1998). The Oaxaca barrio, Tlailotlacan, in urban Teotihuacan features evidence of ethnic Zapotecs who made Oaxaca-like ceramics

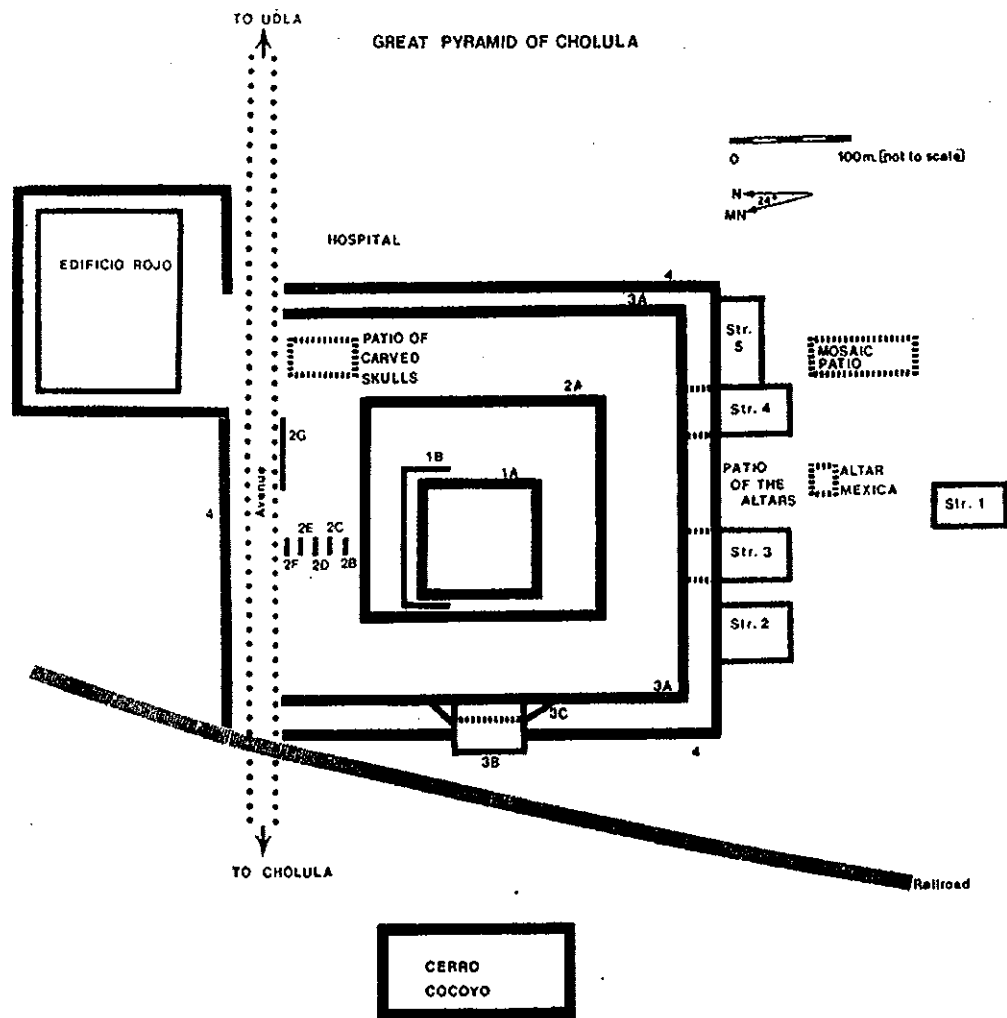


FIG. 1 Plan of Cholula's Great Pyramid

using local Valley of Mexico clay, and who buried their dead in Zapotec-style tombs (Spence 1992).

Teotihuacan influence to the east is best known from Matacapán, identified as a trading center with strong ethnic affiliation to the highland center, as defined by both public architectural style as well as "minor" material culture such as Thin Orange pottery and Teotihuacan vessel forms (Santley 1989). The large site of Cantona, located in the eastern Puebla valley, may also contribute to the cultural mosaic of the Classic/Postclassic transition, though contradictory information on the site's chronology currently clouds interpretation (García Cook and Merino Carrión 1998). El Tajín is a Gulf Coast site that has traditionally been linked to Classic Teotihuacan, but has

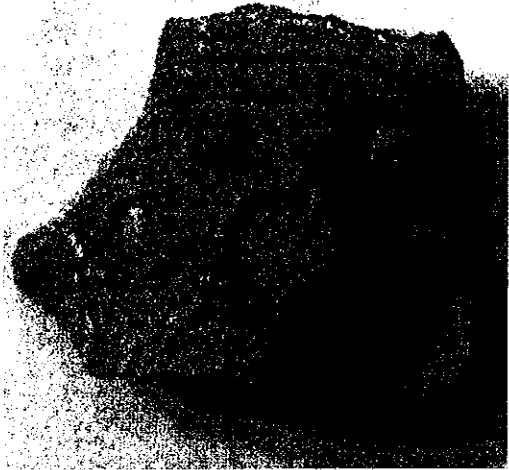
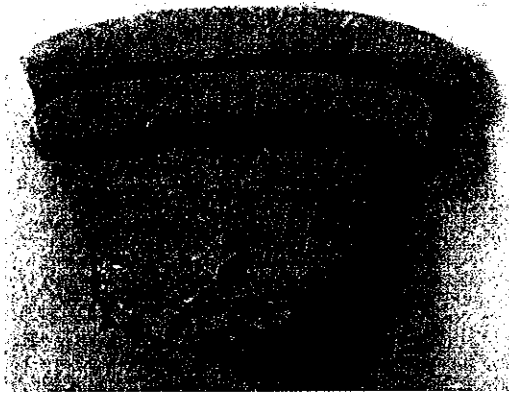


FIG. 2 Late Classic
figurines from
Transito site displaying
stylistic similarities
to Teotihuacan

recently been redated to the Epiclassic/Early Postclassic period, CE 800–1000 (Brüggemann 1990; Koontz 2002), and so will be discussed below.

Curiously, this pattern of Teotihuacan influence is not substantiated at the major urban and religious center of Cholula, located 100 km southeast of Teotihuacan, where Classic-period monumental architecture at the Great Pyramid is distinct from Teotihuacan artistic canons (McCafferty 1996a, 2000, 2001). Cholula was never as large as Teotihuacan in terms of population, but was its rival during the Classic period in terms of religious importance, at least based on labor investment in monumental architecture. Stage 2 of the Great Pyramid (fig. 1) was built and used during the Classic period, when it measured 180 m on a side and 35 m in height (Margain 1971; Marquina 1970; McCafferty 1996a). It was built on a radial plan, with stairways ascending on all four sides in nine layers, and extending the length of each façade. The north side features a pop-out staircase with 52 stairs. Notably the 24° north of west orientation of the Cholula pyramid does not conform to that of Teotihuacan (Tichy 1981), and talud-tablero architecture is not used in this phase of construction. The architectural program of Classic Cholula contrasted sharply with that of Teotihuacan, perhaps as an intentional public rejection of its ideological “empire” and an expression of a separate identity (McCafferty 2000).

Aside from public architecture, however, Classic Cholula’s material culture does share similarities with Teotihuacan. At the Transito site (R-106), a Late Classic (ca. CE 400–650) house, Teotihuacan-like artifacts are present in ceramic vessel forms, surface treatment, and figurines (McCafferty 1996b; McCafferty, Suárez Cruz, and Edelstein n.d.). Over 90% of the obsidian was green (Edelstein 1995), suggesting that Cholula participated in the Teotihuacan-led distribution network. Yet other obvious indicators of Teotihuacan interaction were missing, particularly ceremonial objects such as incensarios. From this domestic evidence it can be tentatively suggested that Cholula may have shared ethnic traits with Teotihuacan, but was not part of its “official” religious or political system (McCafferty 2000; fig. 2).

Despite the enormous amount of excavation that has taken place at Cholula, much of which focused on the Classic/Early Postclassic-period ceremonial center, relatively little information is available to evaluate Cholula’s role in Classic-period Mesoamerica. Consequently, there is a strong tendency to overlook the site in synthetic studies of pan-Mesoamerican cultural processes; for example there is not even an entry for Cholula in the index to Geoffrey Braswell’s (2003) recent edited volume on Maya/Teotihuacan interaction, suggesting that it does not factor into the interpretations of any of the contributors. Most who focus on Teotihuacan itself do not incorporate Cholula in their interpretations. The Classic period social organization of the city remains one of many major gaps in our knowledge, and addressing this problem has the potential to add significantly to future interpretations.

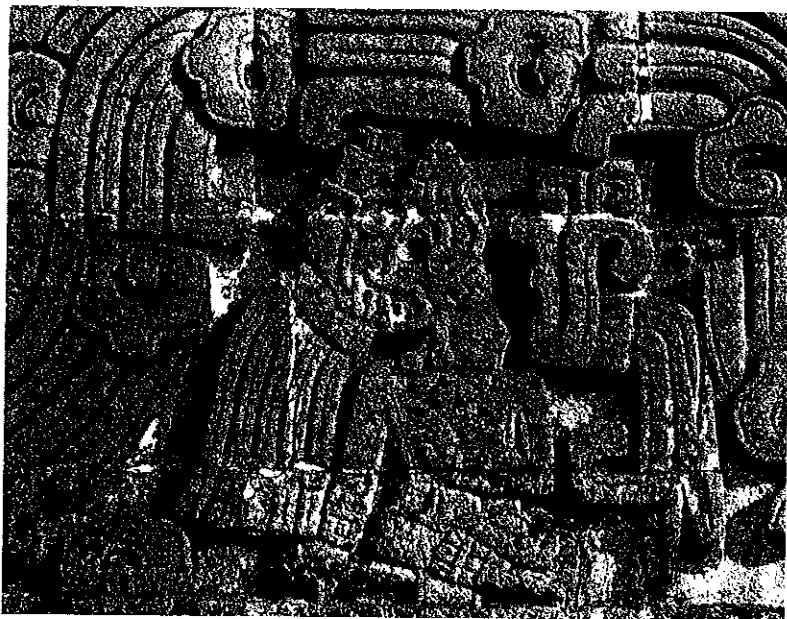


FIG. 3 Figure seated in Mayoid posture on Temple of the Feathered Serpent at Xochicalco

CENTRAL MEXICO *after the FALL*

With the fall of Teotihuacan ca. CE 700, a power vacuum was created in the central highlands (Millon 1991). Several new sites surrounding the Basin of Mexico were able to rise to prominence, especially Xochicalco and Cacaxtla-Xochitecatl. These sites are both located on defensible hilltops just beyond the Valley of Mexico, and they arose as Teotihuacan was suffering the destruction of its civic-ceremonial complex. The other characteristic that links these sites is the use of Maya-influenced iconography in public art (Nagao 1989).

Xochicalco is located in the modern state of Morelos, west of Cuernavaca. It was founded in about CE 650, with extensive modification of interconnected hilltops and a vigorous building program (Hirth 2000). The most famous of Xochicalco's buildings is the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, depicting an elaborate feathered serpent with cut-shell emblems undulating horizontally along the building's façade (V. Smith 2000). Mayoid individuals with feathered headdresses sit cross-legged within spaces framed by the serpent's body (fig. 3). Hieroglyphic texts on this structure and on free-standing stelae describe named individuals and associated toponyms, in a writing system unlike Maya or Zapotec (Berlo 1989).

Ann Cyphers (2000) has recently presented a ceramicist's perspective on Xochicalco's cultural identity, with a lengthy discussion of possible Mayan influences. Relying heavily on historically relevant sources for the Epiclassic of central Mexico (e.g., Dumond and Muller 1972), she concludes (2000: 16) that "Mayan influences in Western Morelos during the Gobernador phase in art, architecture, and ceramics is significantly



FIG. 4 Cacaxtla merchant with carrying pack (cacaxtle)

greater than that observed for the Epiclassic in the Basin of Mexico." In fact, she believes that the red-on-buff/brown ceramic style is probably related to the Olmeca-Xicallanca. The predominant serving ware of this complex was Xochicalco Polished, characterized by bowls with red rim bands over an orange to yellow surface (Cyphers and Hirth 2000: 117–121). From the description and illustrated vessel forms, Xochicalco Polished may be related to Cholula's Ocotlán Red Rim, described below.

Cacaxtla-Xochitecatl is also located on a defensible hilltop that includes deep trenches that would have slowed attackers. Cacaxtla was first recognized as an important Epiclassic center in 1975 when polychrome murals were discovered (Abascal et al. 1976), and their stylistic similarity to Maya art shocked the archaeological world (McVicker 1985; Quirarte 1983). Since then, other groups of murals have added to this pattern, with Maya-style physiological features, costume elements, and portable objects such as ceremonial bars among the "foreign" traits. The Battle Mural, for example, represents members of two armies with contrasting insignia; the defeated Bird army features Maya-like traits and is shown in defeat by the Jaguar group (Quirarte 1983). A leader of the Bird faction, however, wears female costume and may be depicted in the process of capture to become "founding queen" of a new dynasty (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994). This scene may portray an actual historical event, and figures on the subsequent Structure B are depicted in complementary insignia suggesting that descendants of the "queen" formed a combined Bird/Jaguar dynasty.

Even clearer evidence for Maya presence is shown on an earlier construction phase of the Cacaxtla acropolis, where a figure in Maya costume and with a merchant's carrying frame is identified as 4 Dog (fig. 4), and with characteristics identifying him as the Maya God L (Carlson 1991; Stuart 1992). This deity is further identified by a wide-brimmed hat that is shown attached to the frame. Precious and exotic items on the carrying frame depict some of the trade objects that were imported from the Maya lowlands, including quetzal feathers, rubber, and turtle shells.

Several overlapping themes are indicated in the Cacaxtla murals: ethnic warfare involving Maya and an unidentified, but probably highland group; marriage alliance linking competing polities, perhaps to legitimize a new dynasty; and long-distance trade that features the Maya merchant deity. Another element is introduced at the adjacent site of Xochitecatl, where Mari Carmen Serra Puche has conducted important excavations of the ceremonial center, and more recently in the residential zone (Serra Puche and Lazcano Arce 1997). Although initially founded during the Middle Preclassic period and then abandoned before the Classic, Xochitecatl experienced a florescence in the Epiclassic with new construction and the establishment of a fertility goddess cult centered at the Pyramid of the Flowers (Serra Puche 2001). Grinding stones make up the stairs to the temple atop the pyramid platform, where hundreds of beautiful female figurines and spindle whorls were buried as offerings. Many of the figurines are depicted with their hands raised, in a pose similar to the "smiling" figures famous from the Gulf Coast. Xochitecatl-Cacaxtla probably shared in female-oriented, earth/fertility religious practices similar to those found at coastal sites such as El Zapotal, Jaina, and Cozumel.

Cholula weathered the turbulence of the Classic "collapse" to gain dramatically in size and prestige (McCafferty 1996a, 2000). It even adopted a Teotihuacanesque talud-tablero architectural façade on Stage 3a of the Great Pyramid, as if to proclaim that it was the heir to Teotihuacan's politico-religious legitimacy (fig. 5; McCafferty 2000). But across the taluds were iconographic images from other cultures, particularly from the Gulf Coast and Maya lowlands (McCafferty 1996a, 2001). A greca "T" frieze appears along five successive taluds of the Patio of the Altars on the south side of the Great Pyramid (fig. 6). An identical pattern decorates a Late Classic façade of Structure 22 at Copán, and a similar motif occurs on the Pyramid of Kukulcan at Chichén Itzá. A variation on the motif later appears as an ideogram for "ñuu" (meaning "town" or "city," perhaps comparable to the Nahuatl "tollan") in the Mixtec writing system (M. E. Smith 1973: 39; McCafferty 1994, 2001).

Another prominent motif with Maya antecedents is the "mat" motif. This shows up on a polychrome mural associated with the Patio of the Altars, and also with the tablero of Stage 3C on the west side of the Pyramid (fig. 8). The mat motif is prominent at Copán, where it is associated with the Popol Na council house (Fash 1991: 130-134), and also appears at Chichén Itzá, among other Terminal Classic sites. The mat motif appears in later

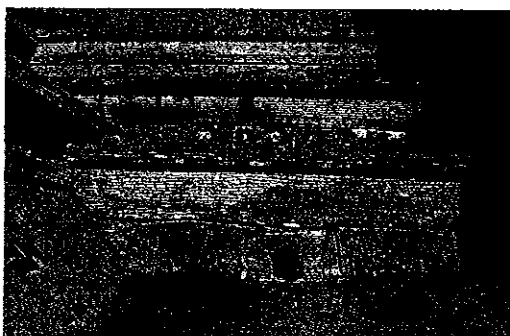


FIG. 5 (Above, left) Teotihuacan style talud-tablero architecture on Stage 3a of Cholula's Great Pyramid

FIG. 6 (Top) Greca "T" frieze on talud of Patio of the Altars

FIG. 7 (Above, right) Carved stone frieze depicting "mar" motif on tablero of Stage 3c of Great Pyramid

Postclassic contexts in central Mexico, such as in Mixtec and Aztec codices, as a symbol associated with political legitimacy (McCafferty 2001). Similar motifs were carved on the upper surface of ornate basalt metate/thrones from the Nicoya region of Central America, the southernmost extreme of Mesoamerica.

Another form of monumental art that has been linked to Gulf Coast style is the carved volute, which at Cholula appears on stelae and altars in the Patio of the Altars (fig. 9; McCafferty 1996a, 2001). Long associated with "Tajín" style by members of the Proyecto Cholula (Acosta 1970), the curvilinear pattern is reminiscent of the style found on many Gulf Coast forms. Recent excavations at the La Ventilla complex at Teotihuacan, however, discovered very similar volutes on painted façades from the Early Classic period (Cabrera Castro 2000). Barbara Stark (1998) has presented a detailed analysis of volute styles from Classic-period central Mexico and the Gulf Coast, concluding that regional differences existed and the emulation of these distinctive styles can be used to infer

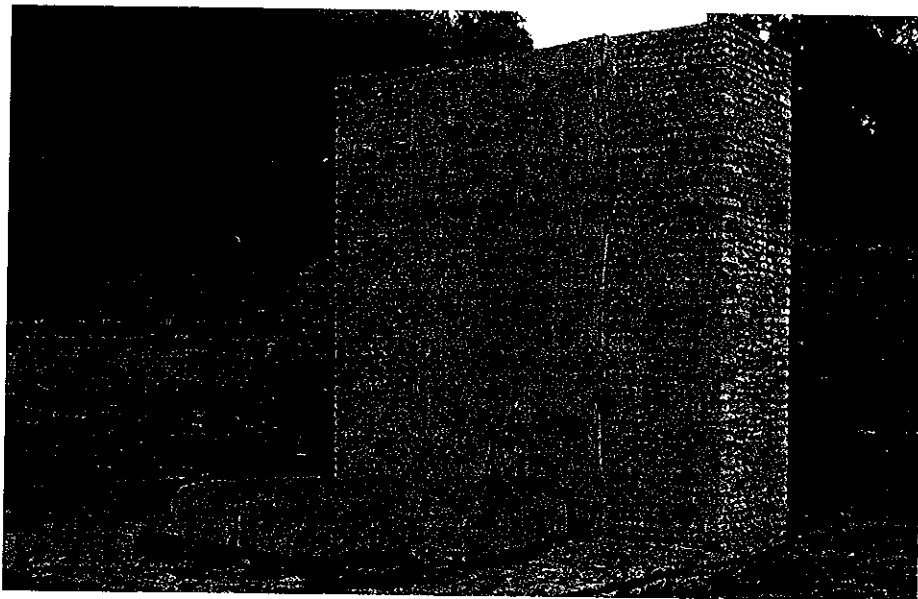


FIG. 8 Stela I from the Patio of the Altars, with volute-style border

elite interaction. Even if the origin of this motif is uncertain, the contemporaneity between the Patio of the Altars and El Tajín supports the premise of a shared motif between Cholula and the Gulf, while the paired stelae and altars are a pattern that is Maya in origin and unknown from Teotihuacan.

Other architectural and decorative styles also link Epiclassic Cholula with the Gulf Coast. A multistage pyramid platform to the northeast of the Great Pyramid has architectural elements similar to El Tajín, even including holes in front of the staircase where banners would have been raised (cf. Koontz 2002). The Bebedores mural associated with an early phase of the Epiclassic Patio of the Altars is bizarre by all accounts (fig. 9; Müller 1972; Reynoso Ramos et al. 2006), but is most similar to the artistic style from Las Higueras among Pre-Columbian murals, and thematically resembles certain Maya vases. Other murals from within the Pyramid have been called "Totonac" because of black squares outlined in white that resemble the contrast of light and dark found on the Pyramid of the Niches at El Tajín (Acosta 1970).

With all this apparent evidence for lowland iconography in the highlands after the fall of Teotihuacan, the obvious question is: Did the Maya ever have a physical presence in central Mexico during their Late Classic, ca. 600–900? Debra Nagao addressed this issue in her 1989 article "Public Proclamation in the Art of Cacaxtla and Xochicalco," in which she contrasted monumental and portable art with "foreign" characteristics in order to suggest the origin and quality of influences at the two sites. She concluded that there



FIG. 9 Detail of Bebedores mural depicting seated figure drinking from small bowl

was little artifactual evidence to suggest actual Gulf Coast or Maya ethnic populations at the sites. Instead Nagao suggests that elites from Cacaxtla and, to a lesser extent Xochicalco, were emulating their "cultural betters" as a form of visual "name-dropping" (Nagao 1989: 100). The artists and consumers of the art were familiar with Maya canons and were involved in re-creating them for political and ideological purposes, but were not Maya themselves.

I have found Nagao's analysis extremely useful and theoretically stimulating—but I've never been convinced that ethnic Maya, or at least intermediate groups familiar with Maya canons, were not important participants in the dramatic changes of the Epiclassic period. As the evidence for Mayoid iconography piles up at Cholula, and correlates with ethnohistorical accounts of Gulf Coast ethnic groups inhabiting the city during the transition period, I have sought out material evidence for this ethnic occupation.

ETHNOHISTORIC EVIDENCE *for* LOWLAND/HIGHLAND INTERACTION

Recovering ethnicity in the archaeological record is a tenuous proposition under the best of circumstances (Bentley 1987; Jones 1997; McGuire 1982; Schuyler 1980). Where it has been most successful is in cases where historical accounts indicate the presence of ethnic diversity, and ethnographic analogy can be used to identify behavioral correlates of the different groups. Thus African ethnicity is identified at antebellum plantation sites, or Chinese laborers are investigated at Western mining camps. One of the factors that consistently confuses these types of research, however, is the extremely dynamic nature of ethnicity itself, which can be quickly and dramatically altered depending on situational expediency (Barth 1969; Hodder 1979).

Ethnohistorical accounts of Postclassic Mexico do indicate the potential for ethnic diversity, including some characteristics that may be used to model distinctive behaviors (Brumfiel 1994; McCafferty n.d.a). These same sources, however, often describe mythical events in the distant past, so carry with them a substantial legacy of historical fiction. How to winnow the wheat from the chaff?

The discipline of historical archaeology has long struggled with this paradox. Although in some senses it has deserved the moniker of being a "handmaiden to history," current historical archaeology is firmly embedded in critical theory in that it contrasts textual and material evidence in search of the consistencies as well as the ambiguities (Leone and Crosby 1986; Leone, Potter, and Schackel 1987). One way that this is done is by using historical, or in our case ethnohistorical, sources to create a model for behavioral practices that can then be tested using material correlates of those practices. Ethnohistorical sources from central Mexico describe ethnic relations during the transitional period, and these can be used to suggest such a model.

In an earlier generation of Mesoamerican archaeology, maps were produced based on ethnohistoric accounts of mass migrations, with arrows representing different cultural groups moving north, south, east, and west. With the development of processual archaeology in the 1960s and 1970s, diffusion no longer carried explanatory weight, and in fact was often rejected by a theoretical school that favored local adaptation over foreign stimuli (Binford 1972; Trigger 1989; but see Anthony 1990; Burmeister 2000). Despite linguistic evidence to the contrary, archaeologists were skeptical about the degree to which populations moved around. This "stay at home" mentality is still prominent in the field, though it has begun to relax, and the new evidence of Teotihuacanos among the Maya (and vice versa) may further open the door to a more dynamic conception of ethnic interaction.

The Olmeca-Xicallanca were one of the groups that, during the "diffusion" era, were often identified as playing an important role in migrations around Mesoamerica (Chadwick 1966; Jiménez Moreno 1942, 1966). They were identified in Teotihuacan, the Mixteca Alta, the Gulf Coast, and the Puebla/Tlaxcala region, especially at Cholula. Their homeland has been the subject of much speculation; based on descriptions of a tropical setting and the etymological relations of "Olmeca" and "Xicallanca" with the southern Gulf Coast I favor an origin near the Laguna de Terminos (McCafferty n.d.a). Although this is an area that included Nahuatl speakers in the Late Postclassic, it was also the homeland of the Chontal Maya who have also been related to the Putun of Potonchan (Webb 1978). Thus, at the time when the Olmeca-Xicallanca arrived on the ethnohistorical scene in central Mexico they were probably ethnic Maya.

Various sources place the Olmeca-Xicallanca in the Cholula area during the Classic to Postclassic transition (*Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* 1976; Ixtlilxochitl 1975-77, vol. 1: 529-530; Torquemada 1975-83, vol. 1: 353-354). The chronology for this occupation is steeped in myth and not very precise, but is estimated as beginning ca. 700 CE (Davies 1977; McCafferty n.d.a) and lasting for about 500 years. The Olmeca-Xicallanca arrived at the end of the Second Age, when Cholula was inhabited by the quinametnime ("giants"; Ixtlilxochitl 1975-77, vol. 1: 529-530). They were enslaved by these "giants," who are believed to have been ethnically related to the Teotihuacanos (Davies 1977: 46). The Olmeca-Xicallanca eventually overthrew and "consumed" the Classic giants. They had as their spiritual leader a priest named Quetzalcoatl-Huemac, and during this period they built a great structure like "a second Tower of Babel" (Ixtlilxochitl 1975-77, vol. 1: 530), that may refer to the final construction stages of the Great Pyramid Tlachihualtepetl. The *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976) describes the Olmeca-Xicallanca occupation of Cholula at the time of the arrival of the Tolteca-Chichimeca, ca. 1200 CE. Diego Muñoz Camargo (1966) identifies the Olmeca-Xicallanca at nearby Tlaxcala, especially at a fortified site that may be Cacaxtla.

In sum, ethnohistoric sources describe an occupation of the central highlands by a group from the southern Gulf Coast at a time that corre-

sponds well with observed archaeological evidence for lowland contact. This ethnohistoric presence even applies directly to the Tollan question. Torquemada ([1975–83, vol. 1: 353–354]; summarized by Davies [1977] and Jiménez Moreno [1966]) describes a group known as the Nonoalca, who joined the Tolteca-Chichimeca at their new center. The Nonoalca were allegedly also present at Teotihuacan, but left after the Collapse to return to Huehuetlapallan, probably located in the southern Gulf Coast near Coatzacoalcos. Later, the Nonoalca returned to the highlands where they helped the Tolteca-Chichimeca in founding Tula, and acted as “culture brokers” to teach Mesoamerican cultural traditions to the new immigrants from the north. The Nonoalca, as agents of Maya culture, would be a fine source for the iconographic program that appears at Tula.

In a recent article, Alfredo López Austin and Leonardo López Luján (2000) describe the Zuyua culture that originated in the southern Gulf Coast and acted as a culture broker of Mexicanized ideas into Yucatecan Maya at the same time that they introduced Maya culture into western Mesoamerica. Zuyua culture seems to have been localized among elites of dispersed areas, with religious, linguistic, and ideological conventions passed to create an elite consumer culture. The Mixteca-Puebla stylistic tradition may have been one of the status markers of this horizon (McCafferty 1994). Note strong parallels between the Zuyua sphere of influence and the “cult of Quetzalcoatl” described by Ringle, Bey, and Gallareta Negrón (1998)—this may be the same phenomenon with a different label.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE *in the* MIXTEC CODICES

The Mixtec codices provide yet another source of ethnohistorical information about the transition period. These record historical and genealogical information stretching back in time from the early Colonial period to at least 900 CE. Although only a handful of codices survive to the present, they represent what must have been the tip of a vast “iceberg” of similar documents. Produced in different cacicazgos to express specific claims of dynastic history and legitimation, certain parallels occur in the more distant, more mythical histories, relating to shared traditions of origin.

One of these origin tales involves Lord 8 Deer, a great conqueror from the town of Tilantongo, who united groups throughout the Mixteca via conquest, coercion, and marriage alliance to forge an empire in the eleventh century (Anders, Jansen, and Pérez Jiménez 1992; Byland and Pohl 1994). In one of the largest and therefore most important scenes in the Codex Nuttall (1975: 75; also the Codex Alfonso Caso 1996: 27–28), 8 Deer and two companions (12 Earthquake and 4 Jaguar) are shown on boats crossing a body of water to attack an island that includes a large temple with a celestial band on the roof and a red and black pillar (fig. 10). Alfonso Caso (1960) identified this as Tlapallan, and David Kelley (personal communication, 1999) has extended this to suggest that the site is located on the Gulf Coast, perhaps near the Laguna de Terminos (also Anders, Jansen, and Pérez Jiménez 1992: 228 n. 1). The Mixtecs could be

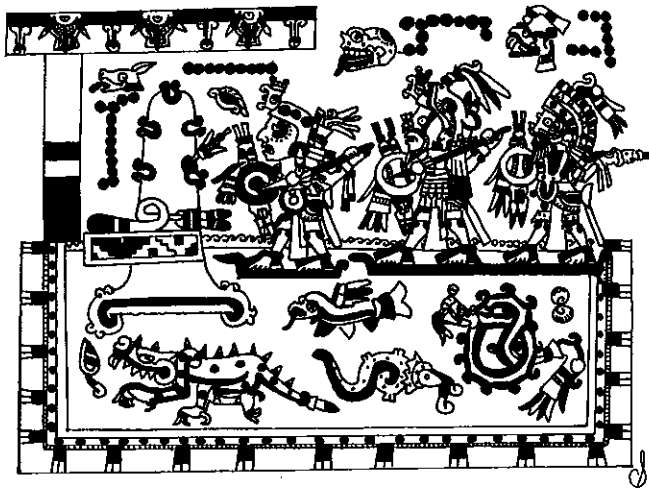


FIG. 10 Mixtec Lord 8 Deer leading a war party to attack Tlapallan (after Codex Nuttall 1975: 75)

in conflict with the same Maya groups that constituted the Nonoalca or Olmeca-Xicallanca. It should also be noted that in the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–82, book 10: 187–188) the Mixtec are grouped with the Olmeca and Uixtotin as being located in the tropical lowlands of the east, likely the Gulf Coast, so it may be that the Mixtec colonized the region now known as La Mixtequilla after 8 Deer's conquest.

The Codex Bodley (1960: 11V–13V) also presents what may be international relations in an extended passage relating to intermarriage and elite visitations among three prominent places (fig. 11), identified by toponyms of a carrying pack (Nahuatl "cacaxtle" = Cacaxtla), a sweatbath (alternative name for Xochicalco "flower house place"), and a greca frieze place with a tule plant (Tollan, perhaps Cholula or Tula; Kelley n.d.). Chadwick (1971: 495) argues that the temple with the white balls (probably hail stones) further identifies this place as Cholula, based on discussion in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*. Identical name glyphs, possibly representing the same historical individuals, are also mentioned on stelae from Xochicalco (Kelley n.d.). This reading might define the creation of an alliance designed to consolidate central highland politics in the ninth century (fig. 12). If so, it was likely a short-lived alliance, since soon thereafter both Cacaxtla and Xochicalco were abandoned, according to archaeological chronologies.

The third site in this alliance is identified by a greca frieze (Mixtec for "ñuu"), and a tule plant. Numerous scholars have proposed identifications for this site. Mary Elizabeth Smith (1973) suggested that it might be Tulancingo in the Mixteca Alta, Alfonso Caso (1960) and David Kelley argue that it is Tula (Hidalgo), while Robert Chadwick (1971), John Pohl (1994), and Maarten Jansen (1996) believe that it is Cholula. As the site where 8 Deer eventually gets his nose pierced in an important

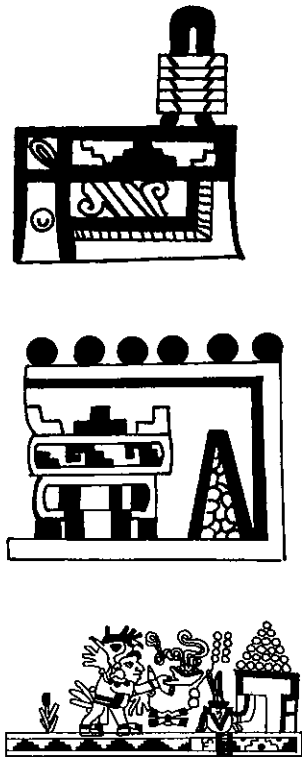


FIG. 11 (Top) Cacaxtle place (after Codex Bodley 1960:3d), (middle) Temazcal place (after Codex Bodley 1960:11e), (bottom) Tule-frieze-temple with hail stones place (after Codex Bodley 1960: 12e)

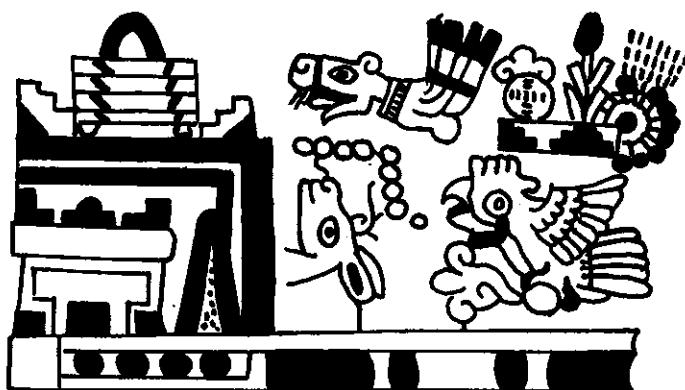


FIG. 12 (Top) Single place sign combining cacaxtle-temazcal-tule/frieze glyphs (after Codex Bodley 1960: 13e-14e)

FIG. 13 (middle) Lord 8 Deer receiving nose ornament at Cattail Frieze (Caso 1977: Lam VIr); (left) Nose piercing ritual as performed at Tollan Cholollan (after Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca. 1976: folio 21r)

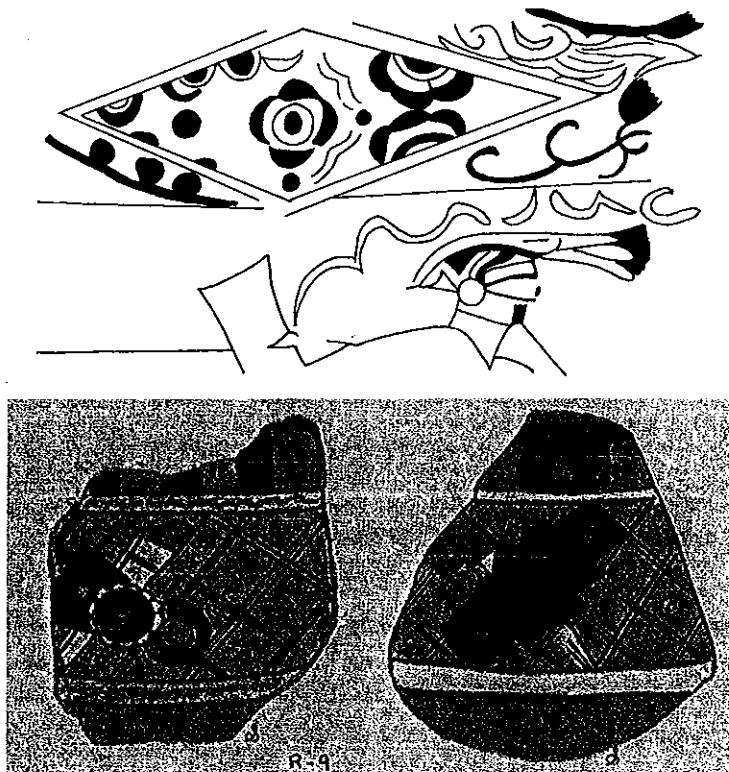


FIG. 14 Jaguar skin motif from Bebedores mural at Cholula

FIG. 15 Coapan Laca polychromes with nose-piercing awl and tecuhtli nose ornament designs

ceremony that confers the "Toltec" rank of tecuhtli, this site is identified as a source of political legitimacy (fig. 13a). During the Late Postclassic, at least, Cholula was noted as such a place (Rojas 1927), and the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976: folio 21r) depicts a nose-piercing ceremony held at Cholula (fig. 13b). In the nose-piercing ceremony, Lord 8 Deer is shown on a jaguar skin, nearly identical to the jaguar-skin motif shown on Cholula's Bebedores mural (fig. 14). Polychrome ceramics from Cholula even depict a bone piercing-instrument and a tecuhtli nose ornament very similar to the one worn by 8 Deer (fig. 15). Based on this evidence it is likely that Cholula was the Tollan of the Mixtec codices.

The Mixtec codices are a wonderful but underutilized source for central Mexican history. Unfortunately, the same isolationist tendencies that have separated Mayanist from Mexicanist archaeologies have also kept Mixtec histories from being integrated into a larger Mesoamerican culture history. The Mixtec codices represent the longest historical and genealogical sequences in Mesoamerica, and to the extent that the Mixtec did include commentaries on political and military events beyond the narrow confines of the Mixteca Alta, then these sources should provide valuable insights into the events of the Classic to Postclassic transition.

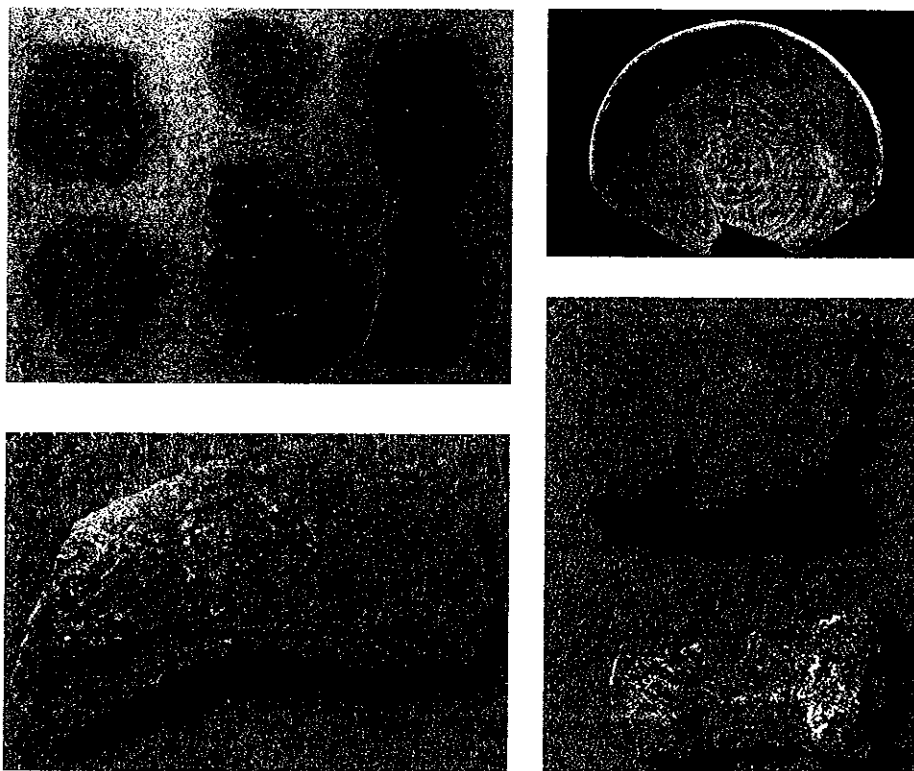
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SUPPORT *for*
LOWLAND/HIGHLAND INTERACTION *at* CHOLULA

In Nagao's critique of lowland/highland contact she concentrated on monumental art and objects of obvious importation, especially carved jades, and found little to suggest a significant presence of lowland populations. Applying a more "dirt archaeology" perspective to this question, recent discoveries at Cholula do indicate an intrusive population at the precise time indicated by the ethnohistoric sources for the arrival of the Olmeca-Xicallanca. Artifacts as indicators of material culture can therefore provide a quantifiable means of measuring population change.

In 1993 I had the opportunity to assist Arq'lgo. Sergio Suárez Cruz of Puebla's Regional Center of INAH in the partial excavation of a Late Classic-period house, termed the R-106 Transito site (McCafferty and Suárez Cruz n.d.). On the basis of this work we were able to describe and quantify ceramics, figurines, lithics, and other domestic objects from a context radiocarbon dated to between CE 400–650 (McCafferty 1996b; McCafferty, Suárez Cruz, and Edelstein n.d.).

The following summer Suárez Cruz and I conducted small-scale testing at an elite residential compound on the northeast platform of the Great Pyramid known as the Patio of the Carved Skulls (McCafferty and Suárez Cruz n.d.; McCafferty 1996b). This was the same area where Noguera (1937, 1954) had uncovered a miniature altar/tomb in the 1930s, located in a small courtyard surrounded on two sides by staircases leading to platforms. Five stages in the construction sequence were discovered predating the altar/tomb. Artifacts from the construction fill provide an intriguing hint at cultural processes of the time, which, based on distinctions from the Transito site and Early Postclassic materials from UA-1 (McCafferty 1992, 1996b), dates to the period between CE 700–900. The ceramics from the different stages were remarkably similar, suggesting that there was not a great time depth separating the stratified deposits. Curiously, the ceramics were nearly equally divided between diagnostics of the Classic period and those typical of the Early Postclassic period. Yet notable in their absence were Teotihuacan Thin Orange, present at a low but significant level at the Transito site (8% of rims), and polychrome pottery common in the Early Postclassic. This suggests that the deposits represent materials from a relatively brief and unmixed moment in time after Thin Orange (and, by extension, Teotihuacan itself) disappeared but before the development of polychrome pottery.

Common ceramics representing the Classic included Teponitla Burnished Gray/Brown and Acozoc Tan/Orange; proportions of these types decreased slightly from the earliest to latest construction level (McCafferty 1996b). Ceramics that later became prominent in the Middle and Late Tlachihualtepetl phases (CE 900–1200) include Cocoyotla Black on Natural, Momoxpan Metallic Orange, and Xicalli Plain, and these increased slightly from the earliest to latest construction levels. The use of



bichrome decoration on the Cocoyotla type is a significant change from the monochromes of the Classic (fig. 16a), and Cocoyotla resembles types reported from El Tajín. Comales of the Momoxpan type are another innovation in this context—no comales were found at the Late Classic Transito site yet they constitute about 20% of all Postclassic rims. Another new vessel form is the stamp-bottom molcajete, with a raised grinding surface created by a decorative mold-impression on the interior base (fig. 16b; McCafferty and Suárez Cruz 2001). Finally, of the handful of import potsherds in the collection, most were of fine-paste wares originating on the Gulf Coast.

Obsidian from the Patio of the Carved Skulls excavation was consistently gray, with only about 10% from the Cerro de las Navajas source near Pachuca, Hidalgo (Edelstein 1995). This is a radical drop from the more than 90% green obsidian found at the Late Classic Transito site, suggesting that Epiclassic Cholula was abruptly cut out of whatever exchange networks were dominating the Pachuca source.

Only a few figurine fragments were recovered. They are slab figures of humans, probably female based on the long skirts, and one had an elaborate floral headdress (fig. 17). These bear similarities to female figurines from Xochitecatl (Serra Puche 2001).

FIG. 16 (Top, left) Cocoyotla Black on Natural bichrome pottery; (top, right) Xicalli Plain stamp-bottom molcajete

FIG. 17 (Bottom, left and right) Female figurine fragments from the Patio of the Carved Skulls

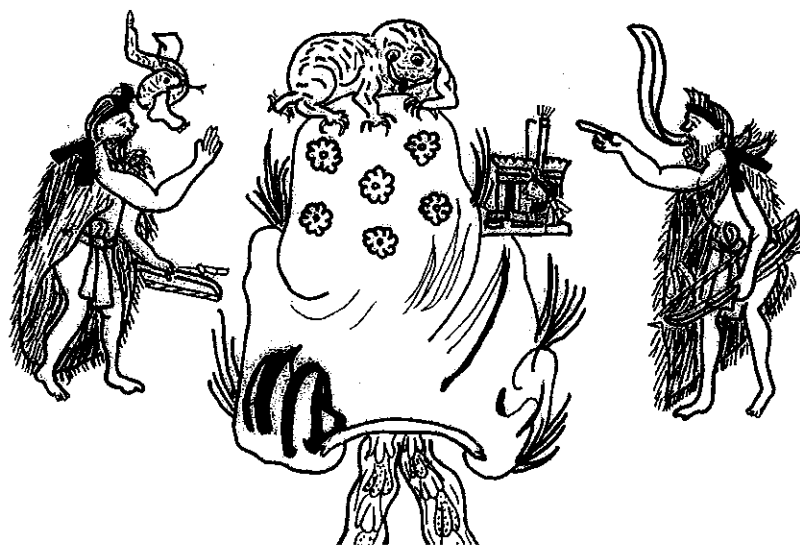


FIG. 18 Location of the palace of the Aquiach Amapane, as depicted in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*

The material culture from the Patio of the Carved Skulls argues against earlier models that suggested the abandonment of Cholula following the Classic period and a complete break between Classic and Postclassic artifact complexes (e.g., Dumond and Muller 1973; Mountjoy 1987). Instead, the Late Classic and Early Postclassic seem to run together in the Epiclassic Early Tlachiuhualtepetl period (CE 700–900). A model of gradual intermixing, with the addition of traits from the Gulf Coast, seems to be a kinder, gentler hypothesis than the ethnic invasions suggested by the ethnohistoric sources and illustrated at Cacaxtla (McCafferty 2003). While the absolute chronology of this occurrence is still not well fixed, the bracket between 700 and 900 is consistent with ethnohistoric accounts of the arrival of the Olmeca-Xicallanca. The Patio of the Carved Skulls context can be correlated with the Mayoid architectural traits from other parts of the Great Pyramid, and even a burial with typically Maya-style cranial deformation identified by Suárez Cruz (1985) as a possible Maya priest or merchant. Finally, the location of the Patio of the Carved Skulls matches a representation of the palace of the Olmeca-Xicallanca Aquiach (fig. 18), one of the dual high priests who ruled the city, according to the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976: folio 7v; McCafferty 1996a).

Later deposits on the northeast platform of the Great Pyramid include brightly decorated polychrome pottery of the type known as Ocotlán Red Rim. This type was very common at the UA-1 Structure 1 (McCafferty 2001b), and was also found in abundance in a trash-filled well from San Pedro Cholula that produced two C14 dates in the 900–1000



range (Suárez Cruz 1994; McCafferty 1996b). The pottery has a diagnostic red band on the interior and/or exterior rim, over a brilliant orange surface with moderate burnishing (McCafferty 2001b). In more elaborate examples, the surface may be covered with polychrome elements in several variations, or with a dark brown panel through which fine-line incising creates geometric patterns, sometimes resembling Maya sky-bands. The polychrome decoration on Ocotlán Red Rim subtype Cristina Matte includes codex-style figures (fig. 19), and the overall design configuration closely resembles concepts found on Isla de Sacrificios ceramics from the Gulf Coast (García Payon 1971). Another Cholula polychrome type, Cuaxiloa Matte, features rim decorations that also appear on the Gulf Coast and even on Nicoya polychromes from Costa Rica and Nicaragua (McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005).

Although Ocotlán Red Rim was not part of the Patio of the Carved Skulls ceramic assemblage it appears shortly thereafter, probably beginning by at least CE 900. It displays iconography and general characteristics comparable with the Gulf Coast. Since this becomes one of the diagnostics of the Early Postclassic at Cholula, I believe that it indicates ethnic affiliation with Gulf Coast cultures, probably including the Olmeca-Xicallanca, and may therefore be evidence of a Maya presence that contrasts with the data available to Nagao (1989).

FIG. 19 Ocotlán Elegante and Cristina subtypes, showing Gulf Coast Maya motifs

What may complicate this issue are ceramic links to both Tula and Xochicalco, where red-rimmed pottery with bichrome motifs bears close parallels to Ocotlán at about the same time period; Joroba Anaranjado sobre Crema (Cobean 1990) and Xochicalco Polished (Cyphers and Hirth 2000) are the best described of these parallels (Cobean 1990). I have not seen much of this material, apart from pieces in museum cases at the two sites, and I am unaware of published frequencies of their occurrence in domestic contexts. Since Cholula displays a greater variety and degree of elaboration in the Ocotlán type and its various subtypes than either Tula or Xochicalco, I suspect that it had an important role in the initial development of the style in the highlands, though the Gobernador phase (CE 650–900) at Xochicalco predates the first appearance of Ocotlán at Cholula.

This type is also the first Cholula polychrome to comprise elements recognizable as the Mixteca-Puebla style, the canon that becomes closely associated with the cult of Quetzalcoatl and the Zuyua sphere in the Early Postclassic. Cholula has long been recognized as a center for the cult of Quetzalcoatl, and these new discoveries on the origins of the Mixteca-Puebla style and the importance of Gulf Coast influences during the Classic to Postclassic transition clarify the cultural composition of the site at the time.

A CHOLULA-CENTRIC PERSPECTIVE *on the TULA/* CHICHÉN ITZÁ PROBLEM

The central highlands were a dynamic region in the centuries following the decline of Teotihuacan, with active participation by Gulf Coast Maya in the cultural development of highland centers. Where does this leave Tula and Chichén Itzá? Recent decipherment of Maya texts from Chichén Itzá indicates that the city was already developing in the Maya Late Classic, while Tula may have lagged behind, not reaching its peak until ca. 950 CE. This is about the same time that Cacaxtla-Xochitecatl and Xochicalco were abandoned, with at least Xochicalco exhibiting evidence of military conquest without reoccupation (Hirth 2000). It is also about this time (based on ceramic correlations) that Cholula's Great Pyramid underwent its last phase of rebuilding to attain its maximum size (McCafferty 1996a).

Was Tula's rise to power related to assistance from Chichén Itzá? Again, there is little archaeological evidence to indicate actual Maya colonists in Tula. On the other hand there is the mythico-historical account of the foundation of Tula with the help of the Nonoalcas, probably an ethnic group from the southern Gulf Coast. This group, described as bringing "civilized" knowledge to the Tolteca-Chichimeca, may provide the source of Maya-like traits and the network to connect Tula with Chichén Itzá (cf. McVicker and Palka 2001). Perhaps a more nuanced archaeology will identify ethnic markers to reveal the importance of Nonoalcas in

Tula. Similarities between Cholula's Ocotlán Red Rim and Tula's Joroba Anaranjado sobre Crema (and Xochicalco's Xochicalco Polished) may pave the way for such an interpretation.

This paper has constructed a highland context for the Tula/Chichén Itzá phenomenon. The long-standing presence of Maya in the highlands, dating at least to the end of the Teotihuacan Classic and accelerating after the fall of Teotihuacan establishes a precedent for the strong Maya characteristics found at Tula. Several sites (Cacaxtla, Xochicalco, and Cholula) are identified as "proclaiming" special connections with the Maya, yet according to the Mixtec Codex Bodley these polities were also working together as a highland alliance, perhaps to limit access to highland raw materials and with military ventures into the Maya Gulf Coast. This situation changed dramatically at about CE 1000 with the dissolution of the highland alliance and the formation of trading partnerships possibly linking Cholula and El Tajín, and with a parallel alliance between Tula and Chichén Itzá.

The suggestions made concerning Cholula's connections to the Gulf Coast are one of the aspects of what is "new" in the lowland/highland debate. Until recently Cholula has been consigned to the abyss of being a big and poorly understood site that was believed to be a non-participant in the Classic to Postclassic transition. Recent archaeological investigations, reinterpretation of previous work, and reconsideration of ethnohistoric sources relating to the site indicate that Cholula was a major player in cultural developments leading up to the Postclassic, and therefore must be central to future syntheses. To adequately incorporate Cholula in the mix, however, substantial new research should be conducted to address problems outlined above. Contrary to popular belief, Cholula has not been devastated by modern development (though its resources have been significantly reduced!), and the potential exists for problem-oriented investigations within the archaeological zone as well as in the urban area of the city itself. Missing pieces to the lowland/highland puzzle await discovery. *Andale!*

Acknowledgements

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